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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) is a well-planned campaign of activities the purpose of which is to sell a product (such as foreign language programs) to an external audience. PR differs from publicity in that publicity is a reaction to occasional events whereas PR is a plan with identifiable objectives which extends over a period of time. In conducting a PR campaign, first programs and the public image are assessed, then goals are set, and finally strategies are developed. Possible activities include involving local businesses, government at all levels, and the surrounding community. Substantive issues can be presented to the public through forums in which educators and community leaders participate in panel discussions. Students can be involved through interdisciplinary minicourses such as a combined journalism and foreign language class. The media can be used by sending press releases and letters to newspapers, working with television stations, and writing public service announcements for radio. These and many other ideas and strategies are developed in the articles and pamphlets listed in the references. (DC)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES. Q&A.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

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FL 014002

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Public Relations for Foreign Languages

Prepared by Anne Marie Harnett

It is acknowledged that the best publicity agents for foreign language study are the interested, enthusiastic students of a skillful teacher. These students will sell the product to their parents and friends, as well as to school administrators and guidance counsellors. However, our focus here is on *public relations* (PR) rather than on *publicity*. It is about selling a product (foreign language programs) to an external audience, that is, to people in the community who are not directly related to the schools. Among these are business, professional and community leaders and government officials at all levels.

How Is PR Different from Publicity?

It is true that the purpose of both publicity and PR is to make events known to outsiders in the expectation that the outsiders will want to participate. Publicity, however, is reactive. Publicity happens when your group is planning a foreign language week or a spring festival. It is as occasional and sporadic as these events. PR, on the other hand, is a well-planned campaign. It has identifiable objectives and extends over a period of time. Like teaching and occasional publicity efforts, PR is a matter of communicating. Unlike teaching, PR must discover its audience and then pursue it. PR makes the issue's (foreign language study) presence known in many places. The effect is "everybody is talking about it." The more ubiquitous the issue, the more importance people attach to it.

What Are the Steps in Planning a PR Campaign?

Borrow a technique from professional promotional campaigns. Take stock of your public image, honestly assess programs, find out which segments of the public have expectations about foreign language programs and what those expectations are.

Next, set goals. Concentrate on the effectiveness of the foreign language program; aim at changing attitudes. Direct every activity of the PR campaign toward a specific objective; make each activity an integral part of an overall plan.

Finally, develop strategies. Set up local and regional PR committees composed of teachers and students under the aegis of a recognized association (the state foreign language teachers association, for example). Use existing models and prototypes. Concentrate the campaign on the segments of the public which show some promise of being interested.

What Kinds of Activities Might Be Used?

- Encourage involvement of the business and professional community in planning and conducting activities and judging competitions.
- Encourage local banks and businesses to display greetings in foreign languages when the occasion is an FL festival or week.

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- Ask members of the business and industrial community to sponsor a particular event. Sponsorship may be financial assistance, a place to hold an event or series of events, free printing of materials. Emphasize the benefit of such sponsorship to the business concerned.
- Maintain a steady flow of information to government on all levels.
- Try to form an advocacy group among community leaders. Perhaps call it "The Friends of Language."
- Take on the task of producing spot TV or radio announcements.
- Organize career orientation fairs, language weeks, festivals that involve large segments of the community.
- Offer minicourses for adults in conversational or travel French, Spanish, German, or other languages.

Consistent use of any or all of these ideas keeps the message in the public eye and ear.

How Can a Substantive Issue Be Presented to the Public Effectively?

One state association of foreign language teachers set up a forum in four cities to present the findings of the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies to the public. The aim of the forum was to ensure maximum public discussion of the report and to give it local meaning. The strategy centered on the forum itself, which consisted of a local political figure, a business leader, a community activist, a representative from the media, and a social studies or foreign language teacher from a local college or university. The presentation included audiovisuals to clarify and emphasize appropriate parts.

The Procedure?

- Choose a community-oriented teacher to supervise the arrangements, including arranging a meeting place, determining news coverage, and identifying community leaders to be invited to participate in the panel.
- Ask the sponsoring association president to mail letters of invitation and background on the commission report to social studies teachers and foreign language teachers in the area.
- Send letters of invitation to community leaders and superintendents of schools in the area.
- Send news releases to targeted newspapers.
- Get a committee to make follow-up phone calls to schools and newspapers.
- Prepare a follow-up news story after the meeting and send it to newspapers that did not send a reporter to the forum. This story should contain extensive quotations from members of the panel.
- Have the association president send a thank-you letter to panelists.
- Use contacts made in the community by requesting letters of support from community leaders for proposed foreign language legislation before Congress.
- Pay attention to timing; try not to compete with sports events.

How Can Students Be Involved in PR?

One method is to set up an interdisciplinary course. Journalism and foreign language teachers can design a minicourse to explore such communications tools as the public service announcement, press release, and TV commercial. The study could be geared to a meaningful Foreign Language Week campaign. Such a course might look like the following:

Lesson 1 examines how people get information in the United States and other countries.
Lessons 2 and 3 focus on promotional activities. Students examine radio and TV commercials, create a product, and write a commercial.
Lessons 4 and 5 present the writing of news releases, examining how the release provides the elements of a news story, and how a public service announcement differs from a commercial.

In Lesson 6 students and teachers produce actual promotional materials that are distributed to the local media for the Foreign Language Week campaign.

Many, if not all, of the assignments and activities can be done in the target language.

How Can the Foreign Language Story Be Told through the Media?

Newspapers

- Write a news release which is a complete, clear, concise account of the event.
- Send letters to the editor. This is one of the most thoroughly read sections of a newspaper. It allows a direct appeal to the reader's emotions and logic.
- Submit foreign language related items to serve as *fillers,* i.e., brief items used to fill out columns when other stories leave gaps.
- Save your press clippings; seek opinions from various sectors of the community; conduct interviews; do a parent survey. Develop these into a feature story.

Television

- Approach the station in person. Know whom you should see and what you want to say.
- Before seeking coverage, ask yourself: What is the message? Who should receive it? Which of the various types of programs will get the message across? Have all this written down.
- Be prepared to work with TV professionals and adapt to their suggestions and requirements.
- Send a color slide of professional quality to be kept on file for use with announcements.

Radio

- Write a public service announcement. Submit legible, double-spaced material the announcer can read easily. Use descriptive words that form pictures, thus giving dimension and color to the text.
- Make the announcement sufficiently stimulating and thought provoking to catch the attention of the rush-hour driver. (The radio audience is largest between 6:00 and 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 and 6:00 p.m.)
- Write 25 words for every 10 seconds of air time. The trend is toward 10- and 20-second spots.

These and many other ideas and strategies are developed in the articles and pamphlets listed in the references. In addition to models and prototypes, you will find detailed instructions on how to write the various releases, what to say, and ways to identify and pursue your audience.

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